European journal of American studies
Reviews 2016-4

Darryl Pinckney, *Black Deutschland: A Novel*

Joshua Parker

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11678
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Joshua Parker, « Darryl Pinckney, *Black Deutschland: A Novel* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2016-4, document 4, Online since 20 December 2016, connection on 24 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11678

Darryl Pinckney, *Black Deutschland: A Novel*

Joshua Parker

Darryl Pinckney, *Black Deutschland: A Novel*

New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016. 294pp (hardback). ISBN: 9780374113810.

Joshua Parker

University of Salzburg

"A lot of people were in the city to get lost," writes the twenty-something African-American narrator of Darryl Pinckney's *Black Deutschland*, set in 1980s West Berlin (230). The same might be said of generations of U.S. expatriates in Europe, particularly in eras when there was much in the United States they were eager to leave behind. In the "involuntary island" of the walled city, "that petri dish of romantic radicalism," Pinckney suggests, time can be "either stretched or discounted" leaving it a "pleasant option" to "repeat yourself" (110). Indeed, Pinckney's protagonist notes, "my story sounded to me like an imitation of others I'd read" (138).True enough, it holds intentional echoes of the footsteps of earlier American writers in Berlin: W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Audre Lorde.

6 Berlin here, like Europe for African-Americans over much of the twentieth century, is a space of recovery (Pinckney's protagonist is a recovering alcoholic), and the novel's Berlin sections interrupt what would otherwise, in his home town of Chicago, have been a cross-generational family tragedy. Flashbacks to life in Chicago make up a good portion of the book (much of the novel's main action is set there, with his parents and siblings). Nothing much really happens in Berlin, which is perhaps the point: for a gay African-American in urban 1980s America, a pleasant, uneventful life would be hardly imaginable in fiction, while Europe, as it already had for generations of Atlantic-crossing African-Americans, affords a life of "the endless hanging out that life in West Berlin was" (198). Even if the middle-class South Side Chicago Pinckney describes is more benign than Richard Wright's 1940s U.S. South, James Baldwin's 1920s Harlem, or William Gardner Smith's 1940s Philadelphia, its racism's effects are no less pernicious. High unemployment among Black men is recognized not as a moral failing on their own part, but a sign that "they don't want us here." Reagan's unresponsiveness to the AIDS crisis is another.

7 Berlin allows Pinckney to measure America's direct, binary racism against other more modulated forms of discrimination experienced as such in Europe. Like Baldwin's or Wright's Paris, it is a place of both hope and dissolution. While "of course the gender-empowered of Schöneberg were not racist," this doesn't help him in finding a flatmate in a neighborhood where women are preferred to men and where left-wing students are wary of Americans (127). At the same time, living in a co-op by Berlin's Wall, and working in its café, he doesn't find it "racializing" to wash dishes as he would in America (186), the polarities of Black-White relations oddly rephrased, much as in Paul Beatty's similar Berlin novel *Slumberland* (2008).

8 Pinckney's 1980s West Berlin is frequently compared to Chicago's 1893 World's Exposition –the famous "White City" designed to celebrate the 500th anniversary of America's "discovery" by Europeans. A temporary (and racially-exclusive) city, its own "petri dish" as impermanent as 1980s West Berlin must have seemed. "Numbers of

people who came to the World's Fair," startled by its vision, their lives changed, "never went home," writes Pinckney. "They disappeared, started over somewhere else" (229). The same might be said of many of the minority Americans–writers and otherwise–over the past hundred years, who, having glimpsed a better situation in Europe, refused to return to where they had come from, socially, even when they did return geographically. "Frederick Douglass," writes Pinckney, said "slaveholders were most anxious for free black men to leave the country," but that he "had been with them, was still with them, and would be with them to the end" (232). Pinckney's narrator, much as he explores the other side of the Atlantic, in shifting his attention forever back to his past in America, too, struggles with the pull of home and the "long dream" of equality elsewhere. "Home," after all, "is the place where there is someone who does not wish you any pain" (294).

9 "You tried to stay in Berlin," Pinckney writes, "to hang on to your life there, like greenhorns […] riding broncos and steers. You got thrown from time to time, you fell clean off, you slipped and you slid and got pelted by sharp blows as you stumbled back to your corner" (110), but "the point," he writes, was "to figure out why we were in West Berlin" (209). He is, he realizes, searching for "the American abroad" he is "supposed to be" (226).

10 The gaps in the narrative, like the gaps between Berlin's buildings, are as jumpy and disjointed as Thomas Berger's Berlin of *Crazy in Berlin*, narrated, like it, by an American protagonist winging his way to Berlin, making us realize, or imagine, how much of the city's own historical dealings and decisions have been winged. Like Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, the novel obsessively describes city planning and design while trying to define the traces of an identity constantly in danger of collapsing and reconstructing itself again (the narrator notes that he and Berlin's Hansa housing project share a birthday). There is no private property on Earth, states one main character, an architect: "22,000 miles into space is private property" (47). Indeed, a Black American's, or a gay American's groping toward a sense of self in this "petri dish" can only be part of a wider, more inclusive story of his forebears. "This would forever mark out my generation of black expatriates–we exchanged silent greetings on the streets

and in the cafés of Europe, even when young black American corporate lawyers living in Cheyne Walk or on Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street no longer wanted to have any idea why we would" (131), writes Pinckney's narrator.

11

"One of the reasons I lived in bohemia," offers *Black Deutschland*'s narrator, "was that I was allowed to" (264). Yet in leaving America, much like American expatriates of the Weimar era Pinckney's protagonist is so fond of, finally realizes that in trying to escape "his" Chicago River, imagining it "would be there always, ready to reverse current" with him (293), he finds himself much like Ella Fitzgerald in Berlin, forgetting the words to an American song mid-concert, to realize "just how far from where you came from and on your own you were deep down" (234).

AUTHOR

JOSHUA PARKER

University of Salzburg